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AUTHOR Martin, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

A theory of altruism is presented which can be used to assess the effects of monetary reward incentives upon degree of altruistic giving. In this paper, the motive for altruism is hypothesized to be desire for self-esteem and the esteem of other people. However, one receives esteem only if the intent of the act is to help another person and not to benefit the altruist. The validity of altruistic motives is governed by the context in which help is given. If helpful acts are materially rewarded (i.e., payment for giving blood), then the helper's motives may not be purely altruistic. This has important ramifications for policy makers who may want to increase altruistic and socially responsible behavior by introducing economic incentives. These incentives may actually reduce people's altruism because material rewards may reduce the psychological and social rewards for helping. (Author/AV)

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Paper No. 3

CAN SOCIETY PAY FOR ALTRUISM? OR, WHY VIRTUE MUST BE ITS OWN REWARD

Elizabeth Martin

Department of Sociology and
Institute for Research in Social Science

SP 010 959

Institute for Research in Social Science
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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The quality of individual lives and the degree to which a group or a society functions smoothly depend in large part upon the quality of social relations among people. Interpersonal relationships, economic transactions, and the maintenance and effective use of political power in a democracy are not possible if people do not treat each other with some degree of honesty, trust, and decency. Arrow notes that "the presence of what are in a slightly old-fashioned terminology called *virtues* in fact plays a significant role in the operation of the economic system....the process of exchange requires or at least is greatly facilitated by the presence of several of these virtues (not only truth, but also trust, loyalty, and justice) in future dealings" (1975: 15). The success or failure of government policies and programs--and indeed the continuity of government itself--depends upon voluntary compliance and public willingness to make private sacrifices for the good of the collectivity. Prohibition failed, and busing may fail, because many citizens were unwilling to comply with the law or government directives. Similarly, the success of government attempts to induce citizens to voluntarily conserve energy hinges in part upon public willingness to sacrifice freedom and comfort for the greater good.

Although in any social system there are social and material rewards for such acts of altruism and social responsibility, they are not, as Arrow notes, "bought and paid for at market rates" (1975: 15). Indeed, Arrow understates the case, since there are often powerful incentives to behave immorally, criminally, or at least with indifference to the welfare of other people. How, then, do we explain the

fact that people act in the collective interest at all? Why, for example, do people vote, or voluntarily comply with the law (when the chances of getting caught are very small), behave honestly, donate blood, help strangers, or perform any of the trivial or important acts of altruism upon which a social order depends? If one assumes that humans are selfish, why people expend time, money, or comfort in order to benefit other people is unclear. And, since we do not understand why people sometimes make sacrifices for the collective good, we may not know how to induce them to do so more often. In the absence of understanding, it is tempting to base policy upon the assumption that humans pursue narrow self-interest. Then, the answer to a short supply of altruism is obvious--to increase the supply of altruism, make altruism more profitable. Individuals may be induced to behave in a socially responsible manner by introducing economic incentives to donate blood, to conserve energy, to recycle aluminum, to report crimes which they witness, and so on. But will such policies work?

Considerable controversy exists concerning the regulation of public altruism using market mechanisms. Titmuss (1971) has criticized the commercialization of blood donation in the U.S., arguing that payment for blood has two adverse effects. First, an incentive to cheat is created. Donors with infectious diseases may hide this fact in order to be paid for their blood. Presumably, they would not donate infected blood if motivated solely by altruism. Therefore, payment for blood results in a decline in the quality of blood available for transfusion. Titmuss also argues, with less evidence, that payment for blood undermines altruistic motives for giving and concludes

that "the commercialization of blood and donor relationships represses the expression of altruism, and erodes the sense of community" (1971: 245). Titmuss' latter criticism is astonishing to an economist. Arrow asks "*Why* should it be that the creation of a market for blood would decrease the altruism embodied in giving blood?" (1975: 19). He correctly criticizes Titmuss for presenting neither theory nor evidence to support the claim that market incentives repress altruism. Arrow argues:

> Economists typically take for granted that since the creation of a market increases the area of choice it therefore leads to higher benefits. Thus, if to a voluntary blood donor system we add the possibility of selling blood, we have only expanded the individual's range of alternatives. If he derives satisfaction from giving, it is argued, he can still give, and nothing has been done to impair that right (1975: 18).

In fact, social psychological evidence suggests that the creation of a market for blood may impair the satisfaction of giving and therefore repress altruism. This paper presents a theory of altruism based upon social psychological principles and evidence. The theory may be used to assess the effects of market incentives upon the level of altruistic giving and suggests some possible adverse effects of policies which rely upon such incentives.

A THEORY OF ALTRUISM

The theory of altruism offered is briefly summarized, beginning with a definition of altruism. Leeds (1963: 230-31) defines an act of altruism as one which "(a) is an end in itself; it is not directed

at gain, (b) is emitted voluntarily, and (c) does good." The degree of altruism is therefore determined by the intent as well as the consequence of an act. A helpful act is altruistic only if the intent is benefit for another person and not gain for the "altruist."

We will argue that altruism is a positively valued, esteemed trait and that people behave altruistically in order to gain self-esteem or the esteem of other people.[1] However, if the intent appears selfish, altruistic motives are not attributed to a person who helps, and he or she is not rewarded with esteem. In order to gain the esteem of others, therefore, an individual must appear to have nothing to gain from an act of altruism. Help must be freely given and apparently unprofitable. Moreover, an individual infers his own motives in the same fashion that he infers the motives of other people. Attribution of altruistic motives to oneself also requires that altruism go unrewarded.[2] Therefore, an act which benefits another person is rewarded by self-esteem or the esteem of others only when the apparent motive is altruistic, not selfish. This implies that introducing material rewards for altruism will reduce the psychic rewards in the form of self-esteem and the esteem of others.

The theory of altruism introduced here rests upon four propositions; the propositions and the evidence relevant to each are presented below.

Proposition 1. One motive for altruistic behavior is the esteem of self and others.

Proposition 1 is supported by two sets of evidence. First, since there is evidence that altruism is positively valued, it is plausible that altruism is rewarded by self-esteem and the esteem of others.

Second, Proposition 1 is indirectly supported by evidence that altruism is more likely when self-esteem or the esteem of others is made salient or problematic.

Survey data generally indicate that altruism is a widely held value. Rokeach (1973) finds that Americans attach considerable importance to helping other people, although altruism is not the most highly ranked guiding principle in life. He reports that American men in 1968 rank helpfulness eighth in importance among eighteen values. In some situations, altruism is virtually compulsory. For example, a 1969 Harris poll finds that 75 percent of Americans believe that one is never justified in "ignoring a victim's cry for help." Moreover, both experimental and field studies demonstrate that people who hold altruistic values are more likely than others to behave altruistically by donating blood (Pomazal and Jaccard, 1976), by intervening to help the victim of a violent theft (Schwartz and Gottlieb, 1976), or by helping in other ways. These findings suggest that self-esteem and the esteem of others depends upon the fulfillment of obligations to help other people.

Additional support for Proposition 1 is provided by evidence of a link between concerns about esteem and altruism. Individuals for whom self-esteem or evaluations of others are salient are more altruistic than others. A study by Wilson (1976) indicates that individuals who are strongly oriented toward maintaining self-esteem are more likely to respond altruistically in an emergency than those oriented toward safety. Wilson argues that people who are esteem-oriented are willing to sacrifice their own safety to demonstrate competency by helping.

Experimental manipulations which increase the salience of subjects' sense of self-esteem make altruism more probable. In a review of the

literature on altruism, Krebs (1970) cites evidence that when the sense of competence or self-esteem is enhanced, altruistic behavior is more likely, at least in the short run. Threats to self-esteem also increase altruism. When subjects are induced to wrongfully harm another person, they are more likely to help in a later, unrelated situation. Krebs concludes that "Reparative altruism would seem to alleviate a negative state associated with lowered self-esteem. When ammends cannot be made to the victim, reparative responses are generalized to others" (1970: 267).

Thus, the evidence suggests that when concerns about self-esteem are made salient, altruism is more likely. This is true when self-esteem is salient as a general characteristic of an individual's personality (as is the case for Wilson's esteem-oriented subjects) or when self-esteem has been enhanced or threatened by experimental manipulations.

Desire for the esteem of others (or fear of losing others' esteem) also motivates altruistic behavior. Although there have been few experimental studies of the effects of others' moral judgments upon altruistic behavior, Schwartz and Gottlieb (1976) and Schwartz and Tessler (1972) demonstrate that subjects are more likely to behave altruistically when they believe that others are aware of their actions. Thus, apprehension about evaluation by others increases altruism.[3]

Social psychological evidence suggests first, that altruism is socially valued. Second, altruistic behavior is more likely when concerns about others' evaluations or about one's sense of self-esteem are made salient. Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that self-esteem and the esteem of others are the rewards which an altruist receives from his act.

Proposition 2. Altruistic motives are attributed to an actor only in the absence of strong situational constraints producing altruistic behavior.

Altruism by definition must be intended for the benefit of others and not for personal gain. Experimental studies indicate that environmental cues are important in making inferences about the motives and intentions of other people. The attribution of altruistic motives depends upon the situation in which help occurs. That is, if situational constraints compel helping behavior, altruistic motives will not be attributed to one who helps. (See Jones and Davis, 1965.) In addition, social psychological evidence suggests that individuals employ the same sort of evidence to infer their own motives and dispositions that they use to infer the dispositions of other people. Bem (1965) presents evidence to support the hypothesis that people infer their motives by observing their own behavior and the context in which it occurs. Subsequently, they are likely to maintain a coherent self-image by behaving in a way that is consistent with those attributions.

These hypotheses are supported by evidence from a study by Uranowitz (1975). He suggests that when a situation makes helping virtually compulsory, a person who helps attributes his action to the situation and not to altruistic motives, and is therefore unlikely to help in a second, unrelated situation. On the other hand, a person who is induced to help under conditions of low constraint cannot attribute the action to the situation. He or she therefore infers that the action was motivated by altruism and is subsequently likely to behave in a way consistent with that inference. Uranowitz's hypothesis is supported by evidence of a

negative relationship between the degree of external justification in the first situation and the likelihood that help will be given in a second, unrelated situation.

Thus, altruistic motives will be attributed to a person who helps only when situational constraints can be ruled out as the explanation for the act. A particularly salient feature of the situation is the costs and rewards for an act of altruism. The more an actor has to gain (or the less to lose) from being helpful, the less likely others are to attribute altruistic motives to him or her. When it is costly to help, on the other hand, a person who helps is assumed to be altruistic. Uranowitz's study and other experimental studies of the process of self-attribution indicate that environmental cues are employed to infer one's own motives as well as those of others. Therefore, when an actor helps another person with the expectation of receiving a reward, he and others will infer that his motives were not altruistic.

Proposition 3. Social rewards for a helpful act are contingent upon the attribution of altruistic motives.

Altruistic motives are attributed to one who helps only when no strong situational constraints appear to produce helpful behavior. Proposition 3 implies that social rewards for altruism will be given only when a person appears to have nothing to gain (or, even better, has something to lose) by helping.

Experimental evidence supports the conclusion that social rewards (such as help, gratitude, and liking) are more likely to be given to a person who helps for altruistic rather than selfish reasons. Tesser, Gatewood, and Driver (1968) find that subjects confronted with hypothetical

situations are more likely to attribute altruistic intent and to express gratitude to a benefactor when an act of altruism is costly. Krebs (1970) cites additional evidence that gratitude is contingent upon the attribution of altruistic intent.

Altruistic motives are also rewarded in more tangible ways. Goranson and Berkowitz (1966) find that subjects work harder for supervisors who have given them prior help, but only if the help was voluntary. In other words, a supervisor's helpful act elicits greater work effort only if it is viewed as altruistic in intent. In a similar vein, Michener and Burt (1975) find that group members are more likely to comply with a group leader's request when it is justified as serving collective rather than selfish interests.

In general, social psychological evidence supports the proposition that a helpful act is socially rewarded only when altruistic intent is attributed to the actor. When an actor has something to gain from altruism, on the other hand, an act of help is not esteemed and may be viewed by others as Machiavellian in intent.

Proposition 4. An altruist's gain in esteem is inversely related to the material gain from an act of altruism.

Proposition 4 follows directly from the propositions that altruistic motives are attributed to an actor only when help is unrewarded, and that esteem is contingent upon the attribution of altruistic motives. Proposition 4 implies that the introduction of material rewards for "altruism" will reduce benefits in terms of self-esteem and esteem of others.

Thus, the introduction of material rewards may have complex effects upon the likelihood of altruism. Moral rewards such as esteem are

reduced when a payment is introduced because inferences about the motivation for an act which benefits another person are affected by the situational context, and particularly by whether altruism is costly or profitable to the altruist.

The logic of the analysis presented here is analogous to that employed in studies of the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards upon task performance.[4] A growing body of evidence suggests that the introduction of extrinsic rewards may have a negative effect upon task performance. For example, a child who enjoys school, and therefore works hard, might be expected to work even harder if he or she is paid for good grades. In a review of the literature, however, Notz (1975) concludes that the introduction of extrinsic rewards reduces intrinsic motivation. Paying people to engage in a task that is intrinsically interesting reduces the likelihood that they will spend free time on the task. If extrinsic rewards are withdrawn, intrinsic motivation is enhanced.

Calder and Staw (1975) argue that monetary reward affects self-attribution and hence later task performance. Rewarding a person for a task leads him to infer that he was motivated by the reward and not by intrinsic interest in the task; this self-attribution implies that he will not engage in the task unless it is rewarded. Therefore, monetary payment reduces time spent on a task in the absence of rewards. Similarly, we argue here that when a person is materially rewarded for altruism, he and others infer that his motives were not altruistic. The inference that he is not altruistic reduces the likelihood of future altruistic behavior in the absence of rewards and reduces self-esteem and the esteem of others.

Assuming that Calder and Staw (1975) are correct in arguing that monetary payment affects task performance negatively because one is led to infer that one's efforts were motivated solely by the reward, then the type of rewards that lead to the attribution of extrinsic versus intrinsic motives are relevant. Presumably, rewards which lead to the attribution of extrinsic motives reduce the likelihood that a helpful act will be viewed as altruistic, and therefore reduce the gain in esteem from helping another person.

The literature suggests that monetary payment (Notz, 1975), surveillance (Lepper and Greene, 1975), deadlines (Amabile *et al.*, 1976), and high pressure sales pitches (Freedman and Fraser, 1966) lead to the self-attribution of extrinsic motives and therefore depress intrinsic motivation to perform a task. Notz (1975) further concludes that social approval does not reduce intrinsic motivation. These findings suggest that external environmental constraints, including monetary reward, lead to the attribution of extrinsic motives, while approval by others does not. However, none of these findings concerns the effects of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards upon altruistic behavior. Inferences about one's motives for performing a task may be based on other criteria than inferences about one's motives for behaving altruistically. In particular, social evaluation may have complex effects upon altruism. Studies suggest that social evaluation may enhance altruism among some and reduce it among others. Long and Lerner (1974) find that subjects who are low in the ability to delay gratification are more likely to behave altruistically when others observe their behavior than when they believe they are unobserved. Subjects who are high in the ability to delay gratification are somewhat more likely to behave altruistically

when alone than when observed. Inability to delay gratification implies responsiveness to immediate rewards; presumably such people are not intrinsically motivated and behave altruistically only in response to the possibility of reward (such as social approval) for doing so. Ability to delay gratification implies that behavior is not governed by immediate rewards, and that intrinsic rewards are relatively more important determinants of behavior. Long and Lerner's results suggest--although they hardly prove--that among people high in intrinsic motivation (who are thus able to delay immediate rewards), social approval may suppress intrinsic motives for altruism. This somewhat speculative interpretation of Long and Lerner's findings implies that the effects of social approval may depend upon the level of intrinsic motivation.[5] For a person who is motivated intrinsically, introducing extrinsic rewards may have a negative effect upon behavior. In other words, introducing monetary rewards (and perhaps, for some people, social approval) for altruism may undermine moral reasons to behave altruistically.

Thus, monetary incentives may have complex effects upon altruistic behavior. On the one hand, monetary incentives tend to make altruism more likely. On the other, monetary incentives may suppress altruism, because payment reduces the esteem from altruism. Depending upon the relative magnitudes of the two counteracting effects, the net effect of a monetary incentive may be an increase, a decrease, or no change in the level of altruism.[6]

CONCLUSIONS

Becker, an economist, has properly criticized psychologists and sociologists for failing to develop theories of tastes and values. As he puts it:

> Economists generally take tastes as "given" and work out the consequences of change in prices, incomes, and other variables under the assumption that tastes do not change. When pressed, either they engage in *ad hoc* theorizing or they explicitly delegate the discussion of tastes to the sociologist, psychologist, or anthropologist. Unfortunately, these disciplines have not developed much in the way of systematic usable knowledge about tastes (1976: 817).

This paper attempts to contribute to an understanding of tastes for altruism by analyzing social psychological determinants of altruistic behavior. The motive for altruism is hypothesized to be desire for self-esteem and the esteem of other people. However, one receives esteem only if the helpful act is apparently altruistic--that is, if the apparent intent of the act is to help another person and not to benefit the altruist. The attribution of altruistic motives is governed by the context in which help is given. If altruism is required by the situation, or if it profits the altruist, then it will be assumed that the act was performed because of situational constraints, and not because of altruistic motives. Thus, an altruist will be esteemed to the degree that help is freely given and does not appear to benefit the altruist. This implies that making altruism profitable reduces the return in esteem from an act of altruism.

Thus, social psychological theory and evidence suggest that moral and material rewards may interact in their effects upon altruistic behavior. The conclusion that a material incentive reduces the moral reward from an act of altruism has potentially important implications

for policies which rely upon market mechanisms to regulate altruistic behavior. A policy which ignores the effects of economic incentives upon the moral benefits of altruism may be misguided. Such incentives reduce the psychic or moral rewards received, and if the moral rewards which are lost are more highly valued than the monetary incentives which replace them, altruism may even decrease rather than increase. Even if the net effect of a monetary incentive is positive, the efficiency of the incentive is reduced by its adverse effect upon moral benefits.

Results presented here suggest that Titmuss may be right when he asserts that market incentives for blood donation undermine altruistic reasons for giving. However, this conclusion holds only if altruism is no longer an option because of the certainty of payment for an act of altruism. The theory has no clear-cut implications for the dispute between Titmuss and Arrow concerning the effects of optional incentives upon blood donation. In that case, whether introducing monetary incentives would undermine altruistic reasons for giving is not apparent. Arrow argues that the satisfaction of giving should not be impaired by the existence of a market for blood.

In fact, optional monetary incentives are likely to have complex effects upon altruism. First, introducing the possibility of payment for blood actually increases the moral reward for a person who elects to donate it for free. This follows from the proposition that the return in esteem is greater the more costly an act of altruism. The possibility of payment increases the opportunity cost, and therefore the return in esteem, from free donation of blood.[7] Thus, far from undermining altruistic motives, the existence of a market may actually enhance the moral rewards of unpaid blood donation.

On the other hand, monetary incentives in the long run may undermine moral reasons for giving, even when payment is optional. Once one accepts payment for an altruistic act, one is less likely to give freely again. Acceptance of payment leads to the self-attribution of non-altruistic motives and reduces the likelihood of future altruism in the absence of rewards. Over time material incentives may undermine moral reasons for giving and thus repress altruism.

Although the results presented here do not resolve the controversy between Arrow and Titmuss, monetary incentives may have complex effects upon the motivation to give. As Becker indicates, we do not understand tastes or values; little is known about how people make trade-offs between material and moral values. If the trade-offs are complex, as social psychological evidence suggests, policies which rely upon material incentives to regulate behavior may have unintended and undesirable consequences. The psychological effects of different incentive schemes are largely unknown, despite the fact that they may be crucial in determining the success or failure of such policies. Some caution should thus be exercised in instituting such policies.

Finally, we may raise more global concerns about the desirability of regulating moral behavior using material incentives. In the long run, reliance upon market incentives may result in a shrinking supply of altruism. Such a shift in the motivational basis for moral and altruistic behavior would have important consequences for society as a whole as well as its members. As the supply of voluntary, unpaid altruism shrinks, economic incentives to promote altruistic and socially responsible behavior would become increasingly inclusive and expensive to society.

Such a social system ultimately restricts individual freedom, because the opportunity is reduced to express worth to oneself and one's fellows through positive acts of altruism and social responsibility.

NOTES

1. This is not to say that esteem is the only motive for altruism; experimental studies show that altruism is based upon other motives as well, such as empathy with another's plight (see Krebs, 1975).
2. More precisely, an act of altruism must have no foreseeable rewards; unforeseen rewards may be viewed as unintended and therefore not inconsistent with altruistic motives. Note the inherent difficulty of the proposition that the payoff to an altruist is esteem, but esteem is given only if the altruist does not seek it or other rewards. The difficulty is not in the theory, but one that the altruist must resolve; in seeking esteem by doing good deeds, he must convince himself and others that his motives are not self-serving.
3. Interestingly, subjects are unaware of the influence of other people upon their behavior (see Schwartz and Gottlieb, 1976). This fact may explain why subjects' self-reports sometimes support the conclusion that altruism is unaffected by others' evaluations (see Pomazal and Jaccard, 1976).
4. A behavior is said to be extrinsically motivated if the reward for the behavior is external to or independent of the behavior itself (that is, payment for a task performed) and intrinsically motivated if the activity is self-sustaining and valued for its own sake (such as interest in a task). (See Calder and Staw, 1975.)
5. Wilson (1976) also finds that the effect of an audience depends upon personality traits. The presence of other people has a greater effect upon altruism among subjects who are oriented toward safety than among

those oriented toward esteem. Presumably, esteem-oriented subjects are more likely to be motivated by intrinsic rewards; therefore, the possibility of social evaluation has less effect upon their behavior. However, Wilson's results do not really allow one to resolve the effects of social evaluation upon altruism, since in his study members of the audience served simultaneously as possible models for how to behave and as sources of social evaluation.

6. These ideas may be translated into more formal terms in a straightforward manner. The total utility (U) of an act of altruism consists of two components: U_m, the utility of the material loss or gain from the act, and U_v, the utility of the loss or gain in virtue or esteem. Then $U = U_m + U_v$, and the marginal effect of a change in monetary gain is $\frac{dU}{dM} = \frac{dU_m}{dM} + \frac{dU_v}{dM}$. We assume that $\frac{dU_m}{dM} > 0$, and the theory implies that $\frac{dU_v}{dM} < 0$. (That is, an increase in monetary gain reduces the marginal return in virtue.) If $\frac{dU_m}{dM} > \left|\frac{dU_v}{dM}\right|$, then the net effect of a monetary incentive is a positive change in altruism, although the efficiency is reduced by the negative effect upon moral benefits. If $\frac{dU_m}{dM} < \left|\frac{dU_v}{dM}\right|$, then the loss in esteem more than offsets the material gain, and the introduction of an incentive will result in a marginal decline in altruism.

7. This assumes that other people are potentially aware of the fact that payment was foregone. If not, the gain in others' esteem is not commensurate with the reward that is foregone.

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